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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 003299

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [TU](#) [ZL](#) [EUN](#) [MCC](#)
SUBJECT: COMMISSION'S ENLARGEMENT STRATEGY: CONSOLIDATION
AND CONDITIONALITY

REF: BRUSSELS 3192

Classified By: POL Enlargement Unit Chief V. Carver for reasons 1.5 (b/d).

SUMMARY

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1. (C) The European Commission's (EC) "Enlargement Strategy," published November 6, aims at tackling key issues, such as promoting judicial reform, both earlier than during previous enlargements and with the help of benchmarks. On Turkey, the EC's strategy notes that "the pace of negotiations (with Ankara) depends on the pace of the reforms in Turkey." The EC's policy of consolidation will mean that, while the door for other potential member states remains open, the focus will be on the W. Balkans and Turkey. Greater focus on conditionality will translate into challenges for the current candidate and accession countries that other waves of accession did not necessarily address. The strategy also notes that EC financial assistance will be better targeted to reform priorities in the accession process. While the strategy pays lip service to the EU's "absorptive capacity," it does not address the issue in depth. END SUMMARY

CONSOLIDATION

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2. (C) Weeks before the EC published its report on "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2007-08," Director General for Enlargement Michael Leigh told us that the EC's focus would be on consolidation of commitments and increased visibility of conditionality. According to Commission contacts, consolidation translates into a focus on the EU's existing commitments -- namely to the countries of the W. Balkans and Turkey. The door for other potential accession countries remains open, but the Commission will not encourage any other country to pursue EU accession at this time. Commission and various member state contacts have provided different reasons for this: to assuage "enlargement fatigue" among the European population by focusing on two immediate regions already in the accession pipeline; to avoid endangering the Reform Treaty's (Treaty of Lisbon) ratification, and to dampen further calls from France and elsewhere for a genuine debate on the borders of Europe.

3. (SBU) Turning to more technical issues, several contacts have pointed to the Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA) as another example of consolidation on the EC's part. IPA combines the EC's several instruments for pre-accession financial assistance into one program. The EC has also decided to try to match program assistance with reform priorities more closely, including via proposed revised partnership agreements with accession and candidate countries.

CONDITIONALITY

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14. (C) In efforts both to deflect public criticism (and therefore contain the outbreak of "enlargement fatigue") and address genuine shortcomings in the accession process, the EC is also highlighting the use of benchmarks in the accession process. While the strategy report sidesteps the 2007 accession of Romania and Bulgaria by merely noting that the EC took "safeguard measures at the end of 2006 to address shortcomings in both countries," it stresses that "rigorous conditionality at all stages of the enlargement process helps consolidating reforms" in all countries concerned. Technically, conditionality has always existed in the accession process; candidates had to meet the *acquis* criteria. In practice, the EU sees Turkey and the countries of the W. Balkans as less willing than the central European states of the 2004 enlargement to take the necessary bold reforms voluntarily. Benchmarks, they observe, is one way of prodding the reforms along. Our contacts also note that the Commission itself has grown considerably over the past ten years. This translates into a larger number of officials reviewing how each candidate and accession country complies with its EU obligations. While there will always be political masters who determine whether to cut corners or apply conditionality even more rigorously, a greater emphasis on conditionality is a reality in Brussels.

15. (C) While not specified in its 2007 strategy, the EU will avoid the mistake it made with Bulgaria and Romania of promising accession by a certain date (even with a fall-back date) to any country. Rather, it will seek to judge each country on its own merits and address "difficult reform

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issues at an early stage." Its strategy pointedly notes that in Turkey's case, the pace of accession negotiations will depend on the pace of reforms -- a pace that slowed down since negotiations began in 2005, according to the EC's Turkey Unit.

AND SHARING THE BLAME

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16. (C) For once, the EC shifts from a Brussels-centric policy when the strategy addresses public relations and enlargement. It reasons that member states have the largest responsibility to communicate the benefits of enlargement to their citizens. "The Commission will continue to play its part, by promoting a better flow of factual information on enlargement issues." Left unsaid is how poorly the EU as a whole, whether EC, member states, the European Parliament, or any combination thereof, has communicated the value added of the various waves of enlargement to European citizens. The EC has basically abdicated this important task.

COMMENT

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17. (C) While the EU consolidates its enlargement commitments, we will need to remind Brussels and member states to keep the door open to other potential accession countries. The EU is portraying Croatia as a success story to the rest of the W. Balkans, but the citizens of the region may require more to support needed reforms. In this vein, we may want to press member states to engage actively on visa liberalization for the region as an incentive to increase reforms. We may also want to consult with Commission representations on the ground in Ankara and the capitals of the W. Balkans on how best to use this year's strategy and Commission reports to promote needed reforms. We likely will need to focus accession and candidate countries' attention on the reports' specific recommendations rather than on the strategy that notes. "Their accessions are likely to occur in the medium to long-term." While there will always be

political factors affecting decisions (i.e., Rehn's different positions on an SAA with Serbia over the past year), the accession process will, indeed, be stricter for those countries already in the pipeline compared to the 2004/07 waves.

GRAY

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